

NEANDERTHALS AND EARLY *HOMO SAPIENS* IN THE MIDDLE EAST COST iNEAL Working Groups meeting and Training School in Haifa

ZSOLT MESTER¹ – ATTILA KIRÁLY² – TAMÁS HAJDU³
Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 11 (2022), Issue 3. pp. 67–69.

Neanderthals (Homo neanderthalensis), who developed in Europe, and early modern humans (Homo sapiens), who emerged from Africa, lived together for tens of thousands of years in the Middle East. Of course, this coexistence is understood on a geological timescale, since we have no archaeological evidence that they shared a camp site. If there was such a place, we could most likely find it in the Mount Carmel area, near Haifa, northern Israel. There, numerous remains and burials of both human species were discovered belonging to the Middle Paleolithic epoch (250–40 thousand years before present). Thus, for palaeolithic archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists, this area certainly is considered a kind of “Holy Land”. The University of Haifa, built on top of Mount Carmel, hosted the Integrating Neanderthal Legacy: From Past to Present – iNEAL international research collaboration action meeting and the subsequent three-day thematic training program on 12–16 March 2023.

The *iNEAL* (CA19141) project (Fig. 1), implemented in the framework of the COST Action European scientific cooperation, currently brings together 86 researchers from 32 countries – archaeologists, anthropologists, palaeogeneticists and museologists – in an open research collaboration network. The participants operate in four working groups on the Neanderthal heritage in Europe. One of the tasks of this cooperation is to create an encompassing database of anthropological remains, palaeogenetic results, and archaeological sites, facilitating international research. In addition to sharing data, the



Fig. 1. The *iNEAL* project logo



Fig. 2. Discussion of the Working groups, Haifa
(photo by Attila Király)

project also aims to coordinate research by strengthening and expanding the personal relationships of professionals, as well as involving young students and researchers. Another task is to assemble publications aiding the dissemination of this research to the public: organisers of museum exhibitions and archaeological parks and specialists in scientific dissemination and cultural tourism. The head of the project is archaeologist-anthropologist Ivor Janković from Zagreb. Hungary is represented by anthropologist Tamás Hajdu and archaeologist Zsolt Mester. More information can be found on the project website.

The main topic of the two-day meeting was the

¹ Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, ELTE, e-mail: mester.zsolt@btk.elte.hu

² Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, ELTE, e-mail: kiraly.attila@koveto.com

³ Institute of Biology, Faculty of Sciences, ELTE, e-mail: tamas.hajdu@ttk.elte.hu

discussion of the database (Fig. 2). In an earlier phase of the project, three working groups developed structures for anthropological, archaeological, and palaeogenetic information, which will be linked in the database. For this, a uniform system of data entry must also be developed. The participants also discussed the specific problems that arose in the data collection of each country. Getting to know the *ROCEEH Out of Africa Database (ROAD)* database with a similar objective, created by specialists from the University of Tübingen as part of a German research project, provided useful lessons.

The focus of the [thematic training program](#) was the Middle Paleolithic archaeological record of Western Asia (Fig. 3). It is well known that the earliest human ancestors lived in East Africa, called sometimes as the cradle of humanity. The Middle East, located



Fig. 3. Presentation of find materials, Haifa (photo by Attila Király)



Fig. 4. The Tabun Cave on Mount Carmel (photo by Attila Király)

at the junction of Europe, Asia, and Africa, is thus one of the main routes for groups of people leaving that cradle. The very first dispersion events already touched the region, as the earliest traces from there are nearly 1.5 million years old. The Middle East must have been continuously inhabited from that time. Concerning the climate changes of the Pleistocene Ice Age, several migration waves from Africa are confirmed by the archaeological record, to which migrations from Europe and Asia were added. All this movement resulted in significant cultural diversity in the Middle Palaeolithic, which lasted almost 200,000 years in this Middle Eastern region.

The opening lecture outlined these migrations through physical anthropological remains, also revealing a large biological diversity. These remains



Fig. 5. The Misliya Cave on Mount Carmel (photo by Attila Király)

make the questions about the origin and reasons of cultural diversity even more intriguing. Is it possible to find a connection between technical traditions and certain human ancestors? The first two days' lectures informed the audience about the latest results of Israeli research. Although the main topic was the abundant lithic find material, shell tools, jewellery, and hunting strategies were also discussed, presenting further aspects of cultural diversity. Several lectures on the European Middle Paleolithic supplemented the Israeli results, with the presentation of sites in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Turkey, and Hungary.

The highlight of the event was the afternoon session, when one could get their hands on knapped



Fig. 6. The El-Wad terrace with mortars carved into the rock and a reconstruction of the Natufian burial found here (photo by Attila Király)

lithic tools from world-famous Middle Eastern sites, including Tabun (Fig. 4), Skhul, Kebara, Misliya (Fig. 5), and Nesher Ramla. Moreover, the archaeologists who excavated these sites shared their observations, analyses, and interpretations in person. The third day of the program also brought unforgettable moments: enjoying the professional guide the organisers provided, the participants visited five spectacular [cave sites](#) of Mount Karmel. Each site provided a unique experience. The layers of the Tabun, encompassing hundreds of thousands of years, the mortars carved into the rocks of the El Wad terrace (Fig. 6), the burial site of Skhul, the breathtaking panorama of Misliya overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, and the bat nest of Sefunim, hidden deep in the hidden valley, will remain an eternal memory.